

Asa Whitney and His Pacific Railroad Publicity Campaign

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Asa Whitney is rightly called the "Father of Pacific Railroads,"¹ for not only did he have the vision to comprehend the possibilities of such a railroad and the faith in his own idea as to how it should be built, but he also had the perseverance to work for the acceptance of his plan practically single handed and against heavy odds for seven years. There were a good many others who advanced plans, which if they had been completed might have proved to be equally good. But there was no one else who deliberately and systematically worked for the idea. A careful examination of certain papers in the possession of his family and of the existing newspaper and periodical files of his lifetime has resulted in the uncovering of some interesting facts relating to his career before and after the years he spent urging the construction of the railroad, as well as to his method of inducing the country to demand it.

Born on March 14, 1797, near Lantern Hill at North Groton, Connecticut, and the eldest of nine children, Whitney received the education and general upbringing of the average Connecticut farmer's son of that period. The date of his departure for New York is uncertain, but it was probably around 1817. During the next twenty years he achieved increasing prosperity as an importer of dry goods. He spent several years abroad as a buyer for the firm of F. Sheldon and Company, in which he became a partner, probably in 1834.² Two years later he was the head of his own firm,³ and by 1837 he had purchased a considerable tract

¹ Nelson H. Loomis, "Asa Whitney: Father of the Pacific Railroads," in Mississippi Valley Historical Association *Proceedings*, VI (1912-13), 166-75.

² *Shipping and Commercial List and New-York Price Current*, a weekly paper which gave passenger lists, itemized accounts of cargoes, and the names of the consignees. The name of F. Sheldon and Company appears as F. & H. Sheldon and Company on November 26, 1834, and thereafter.

³ *New York Journal of Commerce*, June 1-7, 1836; Thomas Longworth, *American Almanac, New-York Register, and City Directory* (New York, 1797-1842), 1836.

of land in New Rochelle where he built a large and pretentious home ⁴ for his second wife, Sarah Jay Munro, daughter of Peter Jay Munro, grandniece of John Jay, and related by blood or by marriage to a number of prominent New York families.⁵

Just after the great New York fire of December 16, 1835, he purchased a tract of land on Broadway near Exchange Place from Peter Augustus Jay.⁶ It was expected by a good many people that as the city was rebuilt, business would come farther in from the river fronts, and that section of Broadway would cease to be residential. But in a little more than a year, the financial difficulties of 1837 began, and Whitney found himself among the many city merchants who were hard pressed. Mrs. Whitney died suddenly in November, 1840,⁷ leaving no will or offspring. Her share of her mother's large estate, which might have tided Whitney over the crisis, therefore reverted to her brothers and sisters. Jay foreclosed on the Broadway tract ⁸ and Whitney was forced to sell his New Rochelle property at a low price.⁹ Thus, after an unusually successful beginning, three short years brought about a complete financial collapse which compelled him to start anew.

In a discouraged state of mind Whitney set out on June 18, 1842, for China, where he expected to act in the capacity of agent for several New York merchants as well as do some business on his own account. The voyage out was an unpleasant one and he expressed his impressions of its disagreeable confinement in the pages of his diary, where he also recorded philosophical convictions on the futility of material gain and spoke of the desire to become connected with some activity which would benefit the world at large.

Though he made no direct reference to the Pacific railroad in this early record, the idea was probably already in his mind and

⁴ *Deeds*, Liber 47, p. 1; Liber 57, p. 245; Liber 59, p. 85; and Liber 67, p. 227 (Register's Office, White Plains, New York).

⁵ His first wife, Herminie Antoinette Pillet, whom he had met on one of his trips to France, died in 1833. *New York Commercial Advertiser*, April 1, 1833. See his *Diary* (MS. loaned the author by George M. Whitney).

⁶ *Conveyances*, Liber 349, p. 269 (Register's Office, New York County, New York).

⁷ *New York Commercial Advertiser*, November 13, 1840.

⁸ *Morning Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 2-23, 1841.

⁹ *Deeds*, Liber 93, p. 218; Liber 98, p. 390 (Register's Office, White Plains, New York).

was furthered by the acquisition on shipboard, October 27, 1842, of a month old Singapore newspaper, which related the opening to British trade of five Chinese ports through the signing of the Treaty of Nanking.¹⁰

Although his diary does not throw any light on his movements in China, later writings make clear that during his spare time he gathered statistical information on Chinese industry and trade.¹¹ His business ventures were evidently successful, since he returned with a sufficient income to obviate the necessity of engaging in further business enterprises.

He left China on March 28, 1844, shortly after the signing of the preliminary articles of the Treaty of Wang-hea,¹² which granted to the United States similar privileges to those given Great Britain at an earlier date. During the voyage home Whitney formulated his plan for a transcontinental railroad and presented it to Congress in the form of a memorial on January 28, 1845. The substance of this plan was that Congress should set aside a strip of land sixty miles wide from some point on the western shore of Lake Michigan to the Pacific coast, the route to be through the South Pass of the Rockies, whence one line could be built to the Columbia River and another to San Francisco Bay; the proceeds from the sale of the land were to build the road; commissioners should be appointed by the government to sell the land; but title to the land was not to be vested in them alone or in Whitney and his assigns alone, until the road had been completed for twenty years, when all that was left should be turned over to the latter as a reward for their services.¹³ Even the most optimistic advocates of the railroad admitted it would take many years to complete the road; Whitney was almost forty-eight years old at the time the memorial was presented — consequently he would have had to live to a ripe old age to benefit financially. The only mention of immediate payment to

¹⁰ *Treaties, Conventions, Etc., between China and Foreign States* (Shanghai, 1908), I, 159-64.

¹¹ Asa Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific* (New York, 1849).

¹² *Treaties, Conventions, Etc., between China and Foreign States*, I, 473-508.

¹³ In his first memorial, Whitney did not include the twenty year delay. See *House Executive Documents*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., no. 72, p. 4. But in his more elaborate memorial to the Senate the next year, he did. See *Senate Documents*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 161, p. 7.

Whitney was in the bill brought into Congress to the effect that a salary of \$4,000 a year be paid him for his services in superintending the construction of the railroad.¹⁴ The plan was too altruistic to be believed.

By the time Congress was considering his first memorial, Whitney was at work on plans for a personal reconnaissance of the first part of his proposed route. There were two main reasons why he had settled on a route so far north: it was shorter from Canton to the Atlantic seaports, both north and south, than any other route through the territory of the United States and it passed through more unoccupied but supposedly fertile land than any other possible route. That the land should be unoccupied was a vital point in his plan for as a few miles of road were constructed, the value of the land through which it passed would increase, and so would more surely produce the capital to finance the building of the road. The fertile lands of the Northwest would be in demand only when it was certain that the inhabitants would have a railroad to depend upon for the transportation of their products and of the necessities from the eastern states. According to Whitney's plan, then, settlement was to follow the railroad.

In the past, Whitney had been successful in keeping his name out of the newspapers. He realized, however, that the public would have to be educated up to the point of wanting such a novelty as a transcontinental railroad, for steam railroads were then only about fifteen years old, and such a one would be a mammoth undertaking. Also, while the public was being made to realize the advantages of such a road, it should be made to see the advantages of the route he had chosen and the plan he had made for building it.

As soon as Congress adjourned in March, 1845, Whitney sent to the *National Intelligencer* a letter — which was soon copied by many other papers — in which he urged men from every section to go with him and see for themselves what the first part of his proposed route was like. Although only eight actually went on this trip, the whole country knew about it, for from the time Whitney left New York, June 2, 1845, until he returned in the fall, a series of letters to the newspapers kept the public in-

¹⁴ *House Reports*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 140, p. 47.

formed of his movements. The party left Lake Michigan at a point near Milwaukee, crossed the prairies to the Great Bend of the Missouri, and came down the river to St. Louis where they arrived on September 19, in good health and spirits. Whitney immediately sent to the St. Louis papers a long letter describing the findings of the trip: the soil was good, the rivers could be easily bridged, and there was lumber and stone to be found within a reasonable distance from his proposed route. This letter, too, was copied by most of the important journals of the period. The fact that his letter, dated September 20, 1845, occupied approximately one full newspaper column shows the significance of the subject in the opinion of the editors, since a daily paper of that time boasting of more than ten columns of news was an exceedingly rare affair. The editors evidently realized what Whitney was doing and in most cases were quite willing to help. On October 6, 1845, the *New York Commercial Advertiser* prefaced the publication of this letter with the comment, "Mr. Whitney, the projector of the great railway from the lakes to the Pacific, judiciously keeps the public advised of his movements by circulars to the journals."

The means of transportation being undependable, Whitney was unable to reach Memphis in time for the railroad convention opening, November 15, 1845. The editor of the *New York Tribune* was sufficiently interested in his plan, however, to send a special correspondent down the Ohio River with him. Late in November, 1845, the letters sent back by this correspondent were published. One, on the twenty-sixth, read, "we have a printed letter from the Hon. A. S. Douglass, of Illinois, to Mr. A. Whitney, on his Oregon Railroad. It is full of objections to Mr. Whitney's schemes. . . I mention the circumstance merely to show that the leading men of the West are active pro and con, and that the subject is deemed of sufficient importance to lay it before the people." Disappointed as he must have been at reaching the convention too late to accomplish anything, this attack by Douglas was a help from the point of view of publicity, for it gave him the opportunity to publish his *Reply to the Honorable S. A. Douglas* (Washington, 1845), in which, in addition to refuting Douglas' arguments, he gave a good exposition of his own plan.

Whitney originally urged the advantages to be derived from

the China trade as the principal reason for the construction of the road. But in 1846 the settlement of the Oregon question, and the probability of the acquisition of California as a result of the Mexican War, made the question of intercommunication between the states begin to overshadow that of foreign trade. Whitney's plan was adaptable to both of these territorial changes, however, for he had anticipated forking the road after it had passed through the South Pass.

Between sessions of Congress, Whitney travelled around the country, attending public meetings in many of the leading cities. He began a tour of the western states at Pittsburgh on October 20, 1846. During November, he addressed other meetings in Cincinnati, Louisville, St. Louis, Terre Haute, Indianapolis, Dayton, Columbus, and Wheeling, and according to the *Nashville Triweekly Union* of December 3, he was "said to enlist warm advocates of his project wherever he speaks." Obviously, opposition existed. This period being prior to the present-day type of newspaper cartoon, a sarcastic paragraph was the most potent way of poking fun. Two items appeared in the Cincinnati *Daily Commercial* for November 4. One was the customary notice of what had occurred; the other read:

Mr. Gullible, the President, took the chair, and after a few remarks, introduced Mr. Monchhausen to the meeting. His statement was brief, plain and business-like, in character with the subject, which, like the creations of genius, needs not the glitter of rhetoric for its embellishment, but shows best in the native, simple, yet awful grandeur and harmony of its proportions. He spoke of the relation of his project to other works, yet unlike any of them, inasmuch as it was to "unite neighboring planets in our solar system, and make them better acquainted with each other" — *no capital was required*, no stock was to be issued, no dividends to be made — the fruit of nature, it would create settlements, commerce and wealth, and stimulate production.

At least the public was interested.

Opposition or no opposition, Whitney could not have been other than pleased at the regularity with which these meetings adopted resolutions approving of his plan and recommending it to the careful consideration of Congress. "The western community seem well disposed towards this stupendous enterprise," said the *American Railroad Journal* in its issue of December

19, 1846. Whitney had started the ball rolling. The idea was definitely in the minds of the people that a Pacific railroad was not only possible but probable. The press had taken hold of the idea, and now Whitney had only to guide public opinion along the lines of his own plan. The difficulty there was that other plans were being presented. Some wanted the road built under government auspices, but Whitney insisted on private construction. While Douglas wanted settlement to precede the railroad, Whitney expected it to follow and pay for the road, thus obviating a complicated financing of the project. Worst of all was the quarrel over the geographic location of the route and the eastern terminus. This last point was of greatest interest to the politicians: Douglas of Illinois was the leader of a group favoring Chicago as a starting point, Benton of Missouri of that favoring St. Louis, and several southern senators and representatives clamored for Memphis or points south. Although Congress did not pay much attention to that phase of the question when they assembled in December, 1846, it was in evidence and became more important as time went on.

Nevertheless, Whitney continued to address public meetings throughout the country. On December 23, 1846, he spoke at a meeting in the Chinese Museum in Philadelphia. An advance press notice in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* the day before contained one of the very few accounts of Whitney's personal appearance. "Mr. Whitney is probably the most correct and striking representation of Napoleon Bonapart in personal appearance, that anyone has ever beheld, since the time of the great original; and has often, when in Paris, been annoyed by spectators on account of it."

The only instance where Whitney was badly received was in New York, where on January 4, 1847, he addressed a large audience at the Broadway Tabernacle. All went well until Whitney had finished speaking, when a group of National Reformers called for a certain Ryckman who spoke for a nationally built and controlled railroad and denounced Whitney in no uncertain terms. Before he finished, the place was in an uproar, the lights were put out, the main gas pipe was stopped to prevent their being relighted, and candles were produced and used by the National Reformers who were by that time the only ones left at

the Tabernacle. Their one objection seems to have been in the idea of granting lands to a corporation as a means of providing funds for the building of the road. This they considered discrimination against labor in favor of commerce. So absolutely uncalled for and unprovoked was this rioting on the part of the National Reformers, that the natural result was for Whitney to gain sympathy from some of those who had not yet shown any interest; on the other hand, there were a great many who automatically sided with the rioters. The city papers all referred in great detail to the happenings at the Tabernacle. But, as usual, the New York *Herald* gave by far the most graphic account. Ryckman apparently realized his mistake some time later for on September 29, 1849, a column-long apology from him was published in the New York *Tribune*. In this he admitted that he had opposed Whitney without ever having read his plan, having believed that he intended a great land speculation and nothing else. After studying the plan, however, he had completely changed his opinion of it as well as of Whitney himself. Although it is to Ryckman's credit that he confessed his error, it seems a shame that he neglected to study Whitney's plan until after he had caused what trouble he could by publicly opposing it.

During 1847, ten of the state legislatures passed resolutions urging Congress either to adopt the plan, or to give it their careful consideration. Although Whitney usually remained in Washington while Congress was in session, as he felt it necessary to be on hand if wanted, he made an effort to appear before the various legislatures whenever the resolutions were being considered. The Albany correspondent of the New York *Tribune*, in reporting Whitney's appearance before the legislature there on May 3, said:

Mr. Whitney, of whom everybody has heard so much in connection with the project of a Railroad across this Continent . . . is a dark complexioned, stout, and goodlooking man, very little the worse of the wear — his language is plain, pointed, unadorned, and business-like — and he sticks to his text, the 2,400 mile Railroad.

C. J. Forshey of New Orleans, writing in *DeBow's Review*, suggested a railroad from some point on the Rio Grande to Mazatlan in Mexico at the mouth of the Gulf of California. He emphasized the shortness of his 450 mile route and the mild

climate through which it would pass, as compared with the 2,600 miles of Whitney's road which, he claimed, would be blocked by snow during many months each year.¹⁵ Whitney did not neglect such an opportunity to tell the readers of *DeBow's Review* — and there were many — why all the objections which had been raised to his route were without foundation. DeBow published Whitney's reply in October,¹⁶ and it is likely that it had some effect on the attitude of the Alabama legislature when he addressed its members about two months later. Apparently he convinced the latter that he was sincerely non-sectional in advocating a route so far north, for they liked his address well enough to print it for distribution in advertising the plan as the one they favored — and this from an extreme southern state in 1847, toward a plan for a northern route!¹⁷

More than once the congressional committees to which the plan was referred, introduced bills favorable to it, but further action seemed to be impossible to secure in the winter of 1848, in spite of the fact that in February and March, the names of New Jersey, Ohio, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and North Carolina were added to the list of those states expressing approval of the plan. On July 29, 1848, Thomas H. Benton made a speech in the Senate in which he expressed his opposition to the Niles bill just presented "to set apart and sell to Asa Whitney, of New York, a portion of the public lands, to enable him to construct a railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean." Benton opposed setting aside 100,000,000 acres as suggested in the bill, or undertaking anything in connection with a Pacific railroad without first having a thorough survey and exploration of the territory made, and having the business of the session broken up by taking up a bill out of its turn, sarcastically remarking that "he would not be astonished if Mr. Whitney should come here with a large bill for damages against Congress — damages for going to all the States of the Union for recommendations." ¹⁸ Naturally Whitney who resented such a charge soon replied:

¹⁵ *DeBow's Review* (New Orleans, 1846-64, 1866-70, 1879-80), III (1847), 147-48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IV (1847), 164-76.

¹⁷ See his *Address before the Legislature of Alabama* (Montgomery ?, 1847).

¹⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 1011.

The unprecedented, and I may say, outrageous attack from the Hon. Mr. Benton, in the United States Senate, on the 29th July last, which, it appears, was caused in part by his fears that I may make a claim on the government for having remained at Washington during four or five sessions, having walked upon the carpets of the capitol and annoyed members of Congress, renders it not improper (even without his permission) to simply state my position, so obnoxious to that gentleman.

After reviewing his activities from 1845 to 1848, he went on to say:

I have done all this at my own expense, and have never asked Congress to appropriate one dollar for me. Even the printing of maps to accompany reports of committees, has been objected to by Mr. Benton, and were furnished at my own expense; and in no instance has Congress paid for any extra printing.

In addition to all my time, I have expended a very handsome sum of money, and have never made any claim upon Congress, and now Mr. Benton appears to be horrified from the fear of a claim . . . and that his mind may not be "*disturbed*," but be at rest on my account, I do hereby forever renounce any, all, and every claim upon Congress or the people, for my efforts to get a railroad to Oregon. . .

If I have been troublesome to, and interrupted members of Congress, it was not for myself, but for my country, as a duty, and feeling that every intelligent gentleman (and more especially members of Congress) would find pleasure in examining a subject promising so much good; and I am happy in being able to say that in almost all instances I have been received as politely and civilly as I could have desired.¹⁹

Benton could not seem to realize that Whitney was not a politician.

At the beginning of 1849, the fifth year of his effort to secure action from Congress, Whitney was working as hard as ever. Even the New York *Herald*, which had become one of his opponents, gave him credit for his persistence and on January 12, 1849, wrote, "while we have never approved of the high northern latitudes he has selected for his route . . . still to Mr. Whitney is due the credit for keeping for some years past the subject of a railroad to the Pacific constantly before the people."

¹⁹ *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* (New York, 1839-70), XIX (1848), 527-28.

Apparently there was some fear that he might not continue his efforts, however, for on March 2, 1849, he received a letter from twelve men, then in Washington, but representative of every section, urging him to continue, at least until after the next session of Congress. This letter Whitney reproduced in a pamphlet entitled *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, which appeared in the spring of 1849, and which contained a discussion of the Pacific railroad question in general and his plan in particular, together with an appendix including the favorable report on his memorial from the House, in 1848; the Senate bill granting his request, the same year; and letters, state legislature resolutions, and public statements supporting the plan. This pamphlet and the articles it evoked in the July, 1849 issues of the *American Review* (pp. 67-79) and *Hunt's Merchants Magazine* (pp. 72-79), and in the September number of the *Democratic Review* (pp. 243-48), were the peak of his efforts. A letter dated May 24, 1849, to the Hon. John M. Niles of Connecticut, one of his most interested supporters in the Senate, illustrates Whitney's method of obtaining such publicity:

Since the adjournment, I have not been idle. . . I have also busied myself in preparing the pamphlet, which I hope you will be pleased to read. I very much want a review of, or an article from it embracing the main points of the subject, for Hunts Merchants Magazine, which he will want as soon as the 5th of June, and I know no one so well qualified to prepare it as yourself. If you can attend to it, I shall consider myself under the highest obligation, and it would continue your action and interest in the great subject. It is highly important that this should be done by someone who understands the subject and is not afraid to meet the whole subject in all its present bearings. It is now becoming a sectional question. A Convention is called at Memphis for the 4th of July. And Mr. Benton is at work at St. Louis. By the map with the pamphlet which I send, you will see that, either St. Louis or Memphis would be so sectional as to deprive all the free States from a participation in the benefits to result from a direct appropriation. . .

P.S. A friend is preparing an article for the *Democratic Review* and another for the *American Review*, and yours for Hunts to appear at the same time must I think make an impression.²⁰

²⁰ Gideon Welles Papers (in Library of Congress).

These three articles were obviously decidedly favorable to Whitney and his plan. *DeBow's Review* also ran an article in July, in which all the routes and plans were summarized. Although DeBow himself preferred a plan and route different from Whitney's, he was always willing to give the latter credit for what he had done, and in this particular instance said, he "has perhaps more than any other man in the country illustrated the importance of a connection with the Pacific. He has explored personally a short portion of the route, and visited nearly every State in the Union, to induce their legislatures to co-operate." ²¹

In August, the New York Chamber of Commerce adopted a set of resolutions unreservedly supporting Whitney and advising Congress to adopt his plan as soon as possible.²² Even the *London Times*, of August 21 and 23, noticed this, remarking that "the sanction of this body is a notable fact, and will do much towards carrying out the scheme."

In October, 1849, two large conventions were held, one at St. Louis and the other immediately after at Memphis. Discussions which took place at these meetings concerning the Pacific railroad made plain that local interests and sectional antagonisms would prevent the selection of any one route. The St. Louis group voted to adjourn and meet the following April at Philadelphia. In December, 1849, however, Congress met for one of the most notable sessions of its career, and for months discussed little but those measures later known as the Compromise of 1850. Nevertheless, on March 13, 1850, the House Committee on Roads and Canals did make a report on the Pacific railroad and submitted a bill granting the request of Whitney's memorial. But in spite of a really eloquent plea on the part of the committee, the House would take no action.

"The subject of a railroad to the Pacific seems to possess but very little interest for Congress. We are much disappointed at this, but we presume it receives as much attention as does any subject for the promotion of the general good," said the *American Railroad Journal* on May 25, 1850. Just before the opening of the next session of Congress came a last plea from *DeBow's Review*, in which Whitney was referred to as "the man who has

²¹ *DeBow's Review*, VII (1849), 21.

²² *New York Tribune*, August 11, 1849.

devised the *only feasible plan*, in all its details, from beginning to end . . . the man who originated the whole subject, long before our possessions in Oregon were secured to us, and the means of bringing it to its present position before Congress and the public.”²³

Although the press was becoming discouraged, Whitney made one more effort. He appeared in Washington in time for the opening of Congress in December, 1850. He made it plain to the politicians that failure to act had resulted in the disposal of much of the best land along his route, and that they must act immediately or not at all. They chose the negative course. He had failed, due largely to sectional strife.

In the meantime, Whitney had received some advances from England concerning the possibility of using his plan to build a railroad through Canada. Consequently, as soon as Congress adjourned in March, 1851, he took passage on the *Asia* which sailed from New York on March 26. It was unfortunate that the year he went to England was that of the Great Exposition. The Crystal Palace was far more appealing to the average Englishman than a railroad through the wilds of Canada, and comparatively little popular interest in the railroad could be aroused. There must have been some who were interested, however, for the New York *Herald*, a paper opposed to Whitney for the preceding five years, wrote on June 14, 1851:

According to all accounts, Mr. Asa Whitney is making great progress in England in his scheme of connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans by railroad, if we are to judge from the puffs and notices which appear in the English press. All these notices and puffs, however, concerning Mr. Whitney's magnificent but somewhat impracticable scheme, are understood by the press here. The fact is, Mr. Whitney is a most industrious attendant on editorial personages. He will pursue them from pillar to post and post to pillar, run them all down with his importunities to puff him and his scheme — bore them almost to death, and press them to give favorable notice to his plan of a railroad in their columns. When his annoyance can be no longer borne, the editor gives him a notice to get rid of him, and he goes away perfectly satisfied. He gets the notice and they get rid of the annoyance.

²³ *DeBow's Review*, IX (1850), 606.

This, then, was Whitney's method with the press. The error was in assuming that all editors felt that way about him. It is impossible to believe that the many who referred to him in no less than laudatory terms, year after year, did so merely because he annoyed them and they wanted to get rid of him. Whitney's motive in persistently pursuing the editors was to secure a true report of his plan to the people, who in turn would demand recognition of it by Congress. Publicity for the plan was what he wanted, and it made little difference to him whether an editor granted his requests for space in a paper easily or under protest as long as the space was his.

Whitney sailed from Liverpool on August 18, on the packet ship *Isaac Webb*. He had had no more actual success in England than in America. According to an article in the London *Morning Chronicle* of December 26, however,

At first he found but little sympathy, and he met with formidable opposition. His data were disputed, and his practical conclusions were held to be exceedingly questionable. Still he persevered, and, strong in the integrity of his purpose, and in the *bona fide* nature of his proceedings, he was more successful in converting opponents, satisfying objectors, and winning the cordial confidence and support of impartial persons, than perhaps any other American who has ever visited us for the purpose of promoting a commercial enterprise.²⁴

Whitney was through. He had devoted himself constantly for seven years to the Pacific railroad. Although he seemed to have failed, the people were almost unanimous in wanting a railroad, and it was generally admitted that he was more nearly responsible for their state of mind than anyone else. Sectional prejudice was the only real obstacle, but that was more than enough. When the appropriation was made for the survey of the proposed routes in 1853,²⁵ there were many who thought that would offer a solution; but there were others who realized that no matter what was found, sectional antagonisms would remain too strong to be overcome by any reports that might be turned in, for the simple reason that they knew a road could be constructed on any of the routes which would be examined. The question was:

²⁴ Reprinted in the *National Intelligencer*, February 2, 1852.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that Whitney requested a survey in his first memorial. See *House Exec. Doc.*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., no. 72, p. 4.

which should be the first? There were comparatively few people who had any idea that more than one road would be started before a good many years had elapsed.²⁶ The people on the Pacific coast begged for action, but even their efforts combined with those of some of the older states could not accomplish any more than Whitney alone had.

If personal glory had been all he wanted in his Pacific railroad campaign, Whitney would have had no difficulty in keeping his name before the public after he had ceased urging that the railroad be built. The fact that there is frequent later reference to his early activities shows that neither he nor his effort was forgotten. But what he himself did after 1852 was something the public never knew. When he married again on October 6, 1852, there was only the briefest possible notice in a very few papers.²⁷

When the Civil War broke out, it became a military necessity that the Pacific states be supplied with the railroad, and, as the adherents of the southern route had seceded, a majority for one of the other two could surely be secured. While the debate on the Pacific railroad bill was in progress, Representative Albert S. White of Indiana, exasperated at the obstinacy of some of his colleagues, said, "the shade of Whitney — for I believe he is dead—ought to teach the gentleman from Vermont that this road will be the means of carrying the fruits of our abundant harvests to feed the famishing millions of the Old World."²⁸ At the moment these words were being uttered, Whitney was living quietly and comfortably at Locust Hill, about an hour's ride from the Capitol. Finally, in June, 1862, Congress passed the first Pacific Railroad Act, and what happened to it is a story apart from Whitney's.

His brothers and sisters all lived in the north and supported the Union cause. His wife and her sisters were southerners who lost their property through the war. A letter to his sister Lucy, dated November 6, 1865, shows quite clearly that he considered the war unnecessary and unjust, and brought on by "unprin-

²⁶ Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of the Great West* (Cincinnati, 1855), 445.

²⁷ *New York Evening Post*, October 7, 1852. His third wife, Mrs. Catherine Moore Campbell, was a daughter of Maurice Moore of Wilmington, North Carolina.

²⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 37 Cong., 2 Sess., 1727. The "gentleman from Vermont" was Justin S. Morrill.

ciplined political demagogues.”²⁹ If anyone in the country had good cause to lose patience with politicians in general and Congress in particular, it was Whitney, but he seems in this letter to be more bothered by their activities during the war than he ever had been by the treatment he had received. He undoubtedly had far more sympathy for the views of his wife’s family than for those of his relatives in the north.

Information concerning Whitney’s later life is revealed in a letter from one of his nephews, whose recollections of his uncle portray him as “a polished gentleman of the old school,” who lived in an old home containing “many rare and beautiful things he had brought from all over the world and things presented to him by distinguished people.” “Every morning at a stated hour” a “saddle horse was brought to the door and he took his morning ride over his estate. . . At four o’clock each day tea was served. . . At promptly 10:30 A.M. the family carriage was waiting,” to take them to Sunday services at the Rock Creek church. On this particular visit the nephew recalls as the “crowning event” of the occasion when his uncle took him to the White House and introduced him to General Grant. He also comments on the “distinguished” and “noted” people who came to visit his uncle.³⁰ This pleasant picture does not indicate that Whitney ever allowed his failure to make him bitter; nor does it seem likely that the hitherto general impression that “Whitney spent his entire fortune in the attempt to realize his vision of a Pacific railway, and ended his life selling milk from his own dairy in Washington, D.C.”³¹ has any foundation.

After an illness of some weeks, he died of typhoid fever at Locust Hill on September 17, 1872, and was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery. The Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads had been completed more than three years before, and the Northern Pacific, the Southern Pacific, and the Santa Fe were all under way. His publicity campaign had done something for the country after all.

²⁹ Loaned the author by Mrs. George M. Wright, daughter-in-law of Lucy Whitney Wright.

³⁰ The letter is dated April, 1931, was written by George M. Whitney, and is in the possession of the author.

³¹ Slason Thompson, *Short History of American Railways* (New York, 1925), 168.

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